

1 CORINTHIANS 14

COMMENTARY

1 Pursue love, yet desire earnestly spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God; for no one understands, but in *his* spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But one who prophesies speaks to men for edification and exhortation and consolation. 4 One who speaks in a tongue edifies himself; but one who prophesies edifies the [assembly]. 5 Now I wish that you all spoke in tongues, but *even* more that you would prophesy; and greater is one who prophesies than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the [assembly] may receive edifying.

14:1 Having just completed a critical admonition in ch. 13 about the need for the Corinthians to demonstrate *agapē* (ἀγάπη), this next section of Paul’s writing begins with the steady word, “Follow after charity, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but rather that ye may prophesy” (KJV). Ch. 14, particularly with its discussions about tongues and prophecy, does compose what can be one of the most debated sections of 1 Corinthians among contemporary readers, especially as it is associated with different values held among evangelical Christians about the ongoing continuance and/or application of the charismatic gifts. While some of these debates have been important—and today’s Messianic movement is hardly immune to them—what is more imperative for readers to do is to make some attempt to approach the material in ch. 14 from the perspective of the Apostle Paul correcting the Corinthians. He has already emphasized diversity within the Body of Messiah (ch. 12), and has focused upon the need for love to dominate all the Corinthians’ actions (ch. 13). *Now he will address disorderly abuses of the spiritual gifts.* In the estimation of Richard B. Hays,

“The community’s worship assembly...has fallen into disorderly confusion, as various members speak simultaneously and unintelligibly under the inspiration of the Spirit, perhaps even competitively seeking to outdo one another in the display of glossolalia.”¹

Regardless of whether it is tongues or prophecy, a manifestation of the spiritual gifts without proper order or procedures observed, might not just give the *ekklēsia* a bad reputation in a pluralistic religious environment like Corinth—but **it will only give rise to further internal factionalism and discord.** While there should indeed be various actions, genuinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, of spontaneity—they should be actions intended for the edification of others, with a certain purpose to them.

¹ Hays, 233.

In his statement, “Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy” (RSV), it is inappropriate to conclude that a figure like Paul is negative toward a gift such as “tongues,” a gift which he does personally manifest (v. 18). What he does not think is that “tongues”—whether being supernaturally empowered to speak a known language, or some supernatural dialect—is the most important gift. Paul considers the gift of prophecy to be the most important one to seek after. One can surely detect a connection to Numbers 11:29 here: “But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them!’” There is, to be sure, some discussion about whether the gift of prophecy manifests in an entirely spontaneous manner, or is pre-prepared to some degree,² but what cannot be ignored is how **the gift of prophecy is to be employed for the benefit of the faith community** and not just the individual Believer. David E. Garland appropriately directs,

“Prophecy is not individualistic in focus...but is meant to communicate to others in rational, intelligible language. It builds up the community (14:4, 5) through exhortation and consolation (14:3, 31) and its didactic function (14:19, 31). It convicts unbelievers and leads them to repentance and worship of the one true God (14:25). The prophet is inspired by revelation but is not regarded as infallible, since the word spoken is to be weighed and sifted (14:29).”³

Given the gravity of a gift such as prophecy, not only is pursuing such a gift something most admirable, it is also doubtlessly connected to Believers attaining a high moral and ethical standard in their conduct—as prophetic declarations will surely reflect back on the character of the one speaking them!

14:2 The collective venue of benefiting from those who operate in a gift of prophecy is emphasized by Paul: “For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit” (TNIV). Whether one regards the manifestation of a *glōssa* (γλῶσσα) here as being some supernatural tongue or some known “another language” (HCSB), the frequent manifestation of speaking in “tongues” is that only God and/or the individual speaking is likely to know what is being communicated. If some supernatural or Heavenly tongue is what is being spoken, then it will not be known by anyone hearing it. If some known human language or dialect was being spoken, then the probability that someone hearing it would be able to interpret, was not too probable. Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner indicate, “It does not indicate that it was not a human language, but [Paul] did not expect that those gathered would normally know whatever language was spoken.”⁴

Without some kind of knowledge of the language or dialect being issued from a person speaking in “tongues” to God, then all that can be witnessed is an individual “uttering secret truths” (Goodspeed New Testament) to the Lord. While perhaps edifying to the individual, it might not be so edifying to the assembly as a whole, and could complicate relations with outsiders (v. 23). Gordon D. Fee, who does largely identify as a charismatic and surely

² Thiselton, pp 1076-1077; Garland, 633.

³ Garland, 632.

⁴ Ciampa and Rosner, 670.

believes in the importance of the spiritual gifts for God's people today, concludes that the gift of tongues is largely for prayer and praise, and hence is individualistic:

"Although trying to cool their ardor for congregational tongues-speaking, Paul does not disparage the gift itself; rather, he seeks to put it in its rightful place. Positively, he says [some] things about speaking in tongues, which are best understood in light of the further discussion on prayer and praise in vv. 13-17...Such a person is 'speaking to God,' that is, he or she is communing with God by the Spirit...The tongues-speaker is not addressing fellow believers but God (cf. vv. 13-14, 28), meaning therefore that Paul understands the phenomenon basically to be prayer and praise."⁵

14:3-4 One of the obvious and substantial differences, between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy, is how the gift of prophecy knows no language barriers. The gift of prophecy can be employed for the edification of all within the assembly, as it will be spoken in the language of all present: "the one who prophesies speaks to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (v. 3, ESV). As Jeremiah 1:10 puts it, "See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." A genuine manifestation, of the gift of prophecy, will be something that is more immediately comprehensible to be considered by those in a congregation or fellowship.⁶ While it can be useful to speak mysteries in the form of tongues (v. 2), with a lack of interpretation for others, it can result only in self-edification and not congregational edification. "The one speaking in a tongue builds himself up, but he prophesying builds up an assembly" (v. 4, LITV), as the gift of prophecy will be something that all in the congregation can benefit from.⁷

14:5 The main reason why the Apostle Paul is seen being less positive to the gift of tongues and more positive to the gift of prophecy, is how the gift of prophecy is not individualistic and can edify all—and as such decrease the likelihood of further rivalry and factionalism in Corinth. He says, "Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. He who prophesies is greater than he who speaks in tongues, unless some one interprets, so that the [assembly] may be edified" (RSV). Paul is clear that without a public interpretation of tongues for the assembly, manifesting the gift of prophecy is something which is far more important. Presumably the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy *only have* similar value, if tongues can be interpreted. Yet, Fee properly addresses how a figure like Paul is not being overly negative toward the gift of tongues:

"It is sheer prejudice to view Paul here as 'demoting' tongues as such...Anyone who would argue that what is spoken to God by the Spirit for the edification of a believer is of little value is hardly reading the apostle from Paul's own point of view...[Paul] allows tongues and interpretation; he prefers prophecy."⁸

Tongues have a great deal of value for an individual's relationship with God and spiritual edification, but tongues in the corporate assembly can interject some unnecessary

⁵ Fee, 656.

⁶ Thiselton, pp 1087-1094 summarizes a selection of ways in which "prophecy" has been evaluated.

⁷ The Goodspeed New Testament offers the slight, but useful paraphrase of v. 4, "Anyone who speaks ecstasically does himself good, but the inspired preacher does a congregation good."

⁸ Fee, pp 659-660.

complications without an interpretation of them—an interpretation (very) few may be able to provide. *This is why the gift of prophecy is regarded as more important.*

6 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking in tongues, what will I profit you unless I speak to you either by way of revelation or of knowledge or of prophecy or of teaching? 7 Yet even lifeless things, either flute or harp, in producing a sound, if they do not produce a distinction in the tones, how will it be known what is played on the flute or on the harp? 8 For if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, who will prepare himself for battle? 9 So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

14:6-9 Paul inquires of the Corinthians on how the gift of speaking in tongues by itself might not mean too much for the benefit or edification of the assembly: “But now, brothers, if I come to you speaking in other languages, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you with a revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?” (v. 6, HCSB). Without the employment of some of the other gifts, speaking in tongues might, at best, only benefit a figure like Paul himself. A diversity of spiritual gifts to be manifested within the Body of Messiah should be realized, given the necessary distinction to be demonstrated when musical instruments are played: “If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute or the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will any one know what is played?” (v. 7, RSV). All musicians playing only one note on one particular instrument does not and cannot produce any appreciable song or melody.

Even more important, recognizing how the life of faith is like a military battle (2 Corinthians 6:7; 10:1-6; Ephesians 6:10-17; 1 Thessalonians 5:8), is how different notes must be played on the trumpet or *salpigx* (σαλπιγξ): “if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle?” (v. 8, NIV) or “Unless the bugle notes are clear who will be called to arms?” (Phillips New Testament). Certainly, the assembly of Ancient Israel moved at the blowing of the trumpet or *chatzotzrah* (חַצְצֹרָה; Numbers 10:2-9) or ram’s horn or *shofar* (שׁוֹפָר; Joshua 6:4-20). And, ancient armies such as those of the classical Greek or Roman civilizations certainly employed trumpets to sound danger, and issue commands like “Advance!” or “Retreat!” Some distinction in the notes employed by such instruments would be necessary for military order, and could indeed mean the life or death of others. Similarly, in the collective, corporate assembly with others present, the employment of one’s speech needs to not be something unknowable. Paul directs, “So also you, if you do not give a clear word through the language, how will the thing being said be known? For you will be speaking into air” (v. 9, LITV).

10 There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of languages in the world, and no *kind* is without meaning. **11** If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. **12** So also you, since you are zealous of spiritual *gifts*, seek to abound for the edification of the [assembly]. **13** Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret.

14:10-13 While a diversity of sounds is necessary in order to appreciate music (v. 7), a distinction of voices, and being able to identify what they are, is necessary in order for proper human communication: “There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and no *kind* is without signification” (v. 10, American Standard Version). Hays interjects how “Estrangement occurs when we encounter someone who does not share a common language with us, because meaningful communication is impossible.”⁹ Paul states to the Corinthians, “If then I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be to him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh will be a barbarian unto me” (v. 11, American Standard Version). Speaking in tongues or languages which no one will be able to understand, may not be conducive of edifying the corporate Body of Messiah, much less facilitate the environment where fellow brothers and sisters speak to one another and develop relationships.

Paul commends the Corinthians, but tempers their eagerness with the requirement that what they do in the public assembly be for all people in the assembly: “since you eagerly seek the things of the Spirit, seek especially what will help in edifying the congregation” (v. 12, CJB). *A manifestation of tongues is most frequently not going to benefit all.* In fact, the personal edification that one speaking in tongues may desire, might not entirely be present either, given Paul’s word, “Therefore, he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret” (v. 13, RSV). Many people speaking in “tongues”—be it in a supernatural or human language—may not know what they are saying, and other than a sense of feeling moved by the Holy Spirit, might not be able to recognize what is being communicated between themselves and God.

14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. **15** What is *the outcome* then? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also. **16** Otherwise if you bless in the spirit *only*, how will the one who fills the place of the ungifted say the “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not know what you are saying? **17** For you are giving thanks well enough, but the other person is not edified. **18** I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; **19** however, in the [assembly] I desire to speak five words with my mind so that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue.

14:14 Paul speaks about the usage of tongues to the Corinthians, noting the how the individual edification might not be as pronounced as they think it is. He indicates, “For if I

⁹ Hays, 236.

pray in another language, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful” (HCSB). The KJV has the understandable addition for v. 14, “For if I pray in an *unknown* tongue, my spirit prayeth, but my understanding is unfruitful.” The human spirit is the faculty which is connected into God’s Spirit, and hence attuned to the Holy Spirit’s actions (2:10-15; Romans 1:9; 8:16). When a Believer is speaking in a tongue, according to Paul, there is no mental engagement with the Lord. It is almost as though the Holy Spirit must completely take over the communication between an individual and the Lord, because human words are insufficient. As Paul would put it in Romans 8:26-27,

“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God*.”

14:15 While Paul will note later how the gift of tongues is surely important (v. 18), it is not as important as various Corinthians may think it to be. Paul indicates, “What am I to do? I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also” (RSV). Paul envisions a worship of God, composed of both prayer and praise, where *both* the spirit *and* mind are involved. In this vein, what Paul depicts is quantitatively indifferent from the charismatic worship of Israel’s Prophets (1 Samuel 10:5; 2 Kings 3:15) who preceded them. Prayer and praise composed of *both* the spirit *and* the mind is highly important—as it will benefit not just the community as a whole, but the individual wholly. Fee properly summarizes how much of the prayer and praise style of the First Century *ekklēsia* was inherited from the Jewish Synagogue, and to that were incorporated a degree of spontaneous worship activities:

“Singing was a common part of worship in Judaism and was carried over as an integral part of early Christian worship as well, as v. 26 and Col. 3:16//Eph 5:19 illustrate. The evidence from Colossians and Ephesians suggests that some of the singing was corporate; the language of these passages further indicates that besides being addressed as praise to God, such hymns served as vehicles of instruction in the gathered community. Furthermore, both passages, as well as this one, indicate that some of the singing might best be called ‘a kind of charismatic hymnody,’ in which spontaneous hymns of praise were offered to God in the congregation, although some may have been known beforehand.”¹⁰

14:16-17 It does a corporate assembly of Believers little good if some of the main leaders and figures are those who manifest a gift of tongues, and nothing else. As the RSV puts v. 16, “Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how can any one in the position of an outsider say the ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving when he does not know what you are saying?” The other person who is unable to comprehend someone speaking in tongues—and hence being unable to affirm what is spoken with *Amein* (*amein*, אָמֵן; *amēn*, ἀμήν; cf. Nehemiah 8:6; 2 Corinthians 1:20; Galatians 1:5; Philippians 4:20), effectively “so be it”—is labeled to be *idiōtēs* (ιδιώτης), “one who has no professional knowledge, as we say ‘a layman’” (LS).¹¹ The KJV has “unlearned.”

¹⁰ Fee, 671.

¹¹ LS, 375.

It would be inappropriate to conclude that those who cannot understand words being spoken by those employing “tongues” are “idiots,” in our common English jargon. It would be appropriate, per what Paul further says, to recognize that while speaking in unknown tongues in the corporate assembly might involve some genuine praise to God, many others in the corporate assembly will not be edified from it: “Even if your prayer of thanks to God is quite good, other people are not helped at all” (v. 17, Good News Bible). Those who speak in tongues have a corporate responsibility to actually be understood by all.

14:18-19 Paul approves of the gift of tongues, forthrightly asserting to the Corinthians, “Thank God, I speak in 'tongues' more than any of you” (v. 18, Moffat New Testament). Yet, even with a figure like the Apostle Paul being supernaturally empowered to speak in such foreign languages and dialects, Heavenly or human, he can recognize its limitations, and the places tongues should be spoken and should not be spoken. He says this directly to the Corinthians: “But in an assembly I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may also instruct others, than myriads of words in a foreign language” (v. 19, LITV). The NEB has, “in the congregation I would rather speak five intelligible words, for the benefit of others as well as myself, than thousands of words in the language of ecstasy.” Because of the presence of other people, who might not get too much out of someone else being supernaturally empowered to speak to God in some other language, the common language that everyone understands should be used for teaching and direction. Fee concurs,

“If Paul came to them as they wished, speaking in tongues, it would not benefit them. He must speak in intelligible ways. Now he affirms that he does speak in tongues—more than all of them; but in church [meaning, the assembly], so that others might be instructed, he would rather speak just five words that could be understood than countless words in a tongue.”¹²

We should, to be sure, take note here of how a figure like the Apostle Paul, with his Jewish theological training and heritage, is not speaking against the usage of Hebrew or Aramaic in a Diaspora synagogue, as a part of the liturgy and worship service and expository teaching and discussion which would take place. Hebrew knowledge is actually required for properly appreciating his reference to Isaiah 28:11-12 following in v. 21!

It would also be inappropriate to apply vs. 18-19 as there being a prohibition against people singing songs in languages other than the native language of a community, such as there being bilingual English and Spanish worship, in many North American religious settings today. Paul is specifically opposed to a supernatural gift of tongues being manifested, without any translation (v. 5)—a sure indication that even if a known language, albeit rare, was possibly being spoken by people empowered by the Spirit, a translation was still unlikely. The First Century Roman Empire, though, was multi-lingual, and so in any congregation or fellowship of Messiah followers, some broad multi-language component among Jews, Greeks, and Romans was to be expected.

¹² Fee, 676.

20 Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature. 21 In the Law it is written, “BY MEN OF STRANGE TONGUES AND BY THE LIPS OF STRANGERS I WILL SPEAK TO THIS PEOPLE, AND EVEN SO THEY WILL NOT LISTEN TO ME” [Isaiah 28:11-12; Deuteronomy 28:49], says the Lord. 22 So then tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophecy is for a sign, not to unbelievers but to those who believe.

14:20 Because of widespread misappropriation of the gift of tongues, Paul can tell the Corinthians, “Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults” (NRSV). The implication of such a statement is that a number of Corinthians, because of their misuse of tongues, were apparently on a track to advance beyond a status of being “infants in evil.” Instead, they were to grow to adulthood in their thinking and reasoning, so that they would be able to properly employ the gift of tongues (most likely in their private times of prayer and worship), and also be able to employ a wider array of gifts, most especially prophecy (vs. 2, 5). As the Weymouth New Testament puts v. 20, “As regards evil, indeed, be utter babes, but as regards your minds prove yourselves to be men of ripe years.”

14:21-22 Wanting to direct the Corinthians to a proper orientation of the gift of tongues, Paul makes an appeal to Tanach Scripture, stating, “In the *Torah* it is written, ‘By other tongues, by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people. But even then they will not listen to me,’ says *ADONAI*” (v. 21, CJB). To be especially noted is how Paul, in quoting from Isaiah 28 mainly, employs the term *nomos* (νόμος) or “law” to refer to a part of the Tanach or Old Testament that is not just the Pentateuch proper (the TLV actually has “Prophets” in v. 21). But what can get readers often caught off guard, is Paul’s further assertion, “tongues are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers” (v. 22, RSV). One would seemingly think that the opposite is true, as a powerful declaration of prophecy should be for unbelievers, while statements in unknown tongues or languages should be for Believers. While there are people who find themselves at a conundrum when encountering vs. 21-22, we should not think Paul’s statements too difficult to evaluate when the Tanach passages he references are taken into consideration:

“For *He* says, ‘Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there.’ Indeed, He will speak to this people through stammering lips and a foreign tongue, He who said to them, ‘Here is rest, give rest to the weary,’ and, ‘Here is repose,’ but they would not listen. So the word of the LORD to them will be, ‘Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there,’ that they may go and stumble backward, be broken, snared and taken captive” (Isaiah 28:10-13).

“The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as the eagle swoops down, a nation whose language you shall not understand” (Deuteronomy 28:49).

Paul quotes a reference from Isaiah 28, where the wider context involves Assyria’s attacks on Ancient Israel. When the Hebrew syllables from Isaiah 28:10, 13 are noted, the

emphasis is on how unintelligible gibberish is employed by a foreign state, to speak to God's people about the imminent judgment that they have accrued upon themselves: *tzav l'tzav tzav l'tzav qav l'qav qav l'qav ze'eir sham ze'eir sham* (שָׂם זְעִיר שָׂם זְעִיר קוֹ לְקוֹ קוֹ לְקוֹ לְזָו זָו לְזָו), "do! to-do! do! to-do! rule on-rule rule on-rule little here little there" (Kohlenberger).¹³ Ben Witherington III indicates, "God spoke to them in a foreign tongue that they could not understand, because they would not hear the truth in their own tongue."¹⁴ For those of Ancient Israel in Isaiah 28, the declaration of various syllables to them by Ancient Assyria, would result in nothing more than a widescale rejection and eventual catastrophe unleashed upon them via the exile. Marion L. Soards makes the important point of how what is seen here is little different than Yeshua's statement of Mark 4:12¹⁵:

"Speech in other tongues produces no hearing or comprehension! The sign is the failure to hear—an odd notation, but no odder than Jesus' words in Mark 4:12....[F]or Paul the problem with tongues is that they are unintelligible and so obscure God's clear message."¹⁶

So, when unintelligible tongues or languages are supernaturally issued to an assembly of Believers, how does this become a sign (*sēmeion*, σημεῖον) to the non-Believers present? Per the background of Isaiah 28:10-13, whatever will be declared should be received in a manner similar to the judgment declared upon Ancient Israel in "Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there" (Isaiah 28:10). The sign to be manifest will be a miscomprehension of what is declared, probably followed by a rejection. Fee notes how "it is a 'sign' that functions to the disadvantage of unbelievers, not to their advantage."¹⁷ When a non-Believer enters into the assembly and hears only a word issued in a foreign, or even angelic, dialect, the probability of it being rejected is very high.

The gift of prophecy, rather, is asserted by Paul to be for Believers (v. 22b). While it might initially be a shock that prophecy is *for Believers*—as a dynamic declaration of a word of prophecy would doubtlessly have an effect on non-Believers (vs. 24-25)—prophecy as a sign for Believers should be recognized from the vantage point of serving to confirm God's genuine work in the assembly. As Fee aptly summarizes,

"Over against their preference for tongues, [Paul] asserts that it is prophecy, with its intelligibility and revelatory character, that functions as the sign of God's approval, of God's presence, in their midst. By the revelatory word of prophecy they are convicted of their sins, and falling on their faces before God they will exclaim, 'God is really among you!' That exclamation as a response to prophecy is a 'sign' for believers, the indication of God's favor resting upon them."¹⁸

¹³ Kohlenberger, 4:53.

¹⁴ Witherington, 284.

¹⁵ "so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN [Isaiah 6:9-10]" (Mark 4:12).

¹⁶ Soards, pp 292, 293.

¹⁷ Fee, 682.

¹⁸ Ibid., 683.

Garland also keenly states, “unbelievers will not be convicted by witnessing tongues but will think it incoherent lunacy instead. Prophecy is the only speech that will convict unbelievers that God is among them.”¹⁹

23 Therefore if the whole [assembly] assembles together and all speak in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are mad? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; 25 the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you.

14:23 What is the significant problem with thinking that a gift of speaking in tongues—being supernaturally empowered to speak in either human or angelic languages (12:1)—is the pinnacle of one’s spirituality? Paul inquires of the Corinthians, “If, therefore, the whole [assembly] comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your minds?” (ESV). His reference to *hē ekklēsia holē* (ἡ ἐκκλησία ὅλη) has been taken as widely meaning that the Corinthians often met in small home fellowships, but would then have regular, larger meetings (cf. Romans 16:23),²⁰ which were seemingly more open to the public.

If the employment of tongues is the only spiritual gift to be manifested within the local Body of Messiah, what will the outsiders who enter in think? One important observation appearing in Wisdom 14:28 in the Apocrypha, likely describing ancient Greek religion, is, “For their worshipers either rave in exultation, or prophesy lies, or live unrighteously, or readily commit perjury.” Also to be recalled, is how when the Holy Spirit was poured out at *Shavuot*/Pentecost, and the good news began being declared in foreign languages, that outside onlookers thought that the Believers were drunk (Acts 2:10-15). A misuse of the gift of tongues, can certainly give the wrong impression of Messiah faith to Corinthian non-Believers. Many would think that the Corinthian Believers were mentally deranged, and consequently reject what they genuinely had to offer in terms of salvation and redemption for all via Yeshua. Contrary to tongues, the gift of prophecy (v. 24) serves a more constructive purpose for the interests of the gospel. Noting how a misuse of tongues can cause problems and complications, Hays comments,

“The typical Corinthian pagan observing such a scene would say, ‘Oh, this is just another group like the devotees of Dionysius or Cybele’—one more consumer option in a pluralistic religious market. On the other hand, if outsiders come and find the members of the community prophesying in clear, sober language, they will encounter the word of the Lord, which will disclose...their real moral condition before God...”²¹

14:24 The advantage of seeking the gift of prophecy (v. 1) has effects internally for the assembly as evidence that God is moving (v. 22b), and has effects externally as outsiders will

¹⁹ Garland, 649.

²⁰ Cf. Fee, pp 683-684.

²¹ Hays, pp 238-239.

encounter the word of the Lord: “But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all” (NIV). F.F. Bruce actually concludes—hardly invalidly—that the sign of prophecy for Believers will actually be **in the work of God affecting non-Believers**. He states,

“Paul’s point is that a divine communication in strange tongues addressed to the deliberately disobedient will but confirm them in their disobedience....**[P]rophecy is a sign for believers** in the sense that it produces believers; the **unbeliever or outsider** who would be put off by an outburst of tongues will be impressed if, on entering a church meeting, he hears **all** the members speaking words in a language he knows, which pierce direct to his heart and conscience, expose his inmost secrets, and convict him of sin.”²²

14:25 The significance of the gift of prophecy manifesting itself—as opposed to tongues—is how “After the secrets of the unbeliever’s heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, ‘God is really among you’” (NRSV). Paul’s language of pagans coming to the God of Israel, is rooted within themes of the Tanach (Isaiah 45:14; Ezekiel 39:21; Zechariah 8:23). While there will be some variance among both examiners and readers here regarding what might be associated with non-Believers encountering the gift of prophecy manifested in the assembly, what Witherington directs is broadly appropriate:

“V. 25 suggests that prophecy might...involve divine insight into a present problem or the present condition of someone’s heart....A prophecy was certainly not a sermon by twentieth-century standards. It was a spontaneous utterance prompted by the Spirit (cf. vv. 29ff) and based on a sudden and uncontrived revelation from God (v. 30). It was controllable by the speaker, however, and thus was unlike pagan ecstatic utterances of the Dionysiac sort. In Christian prophecy both the mind and spirit are edified.”²³

A gift of prophecy is notably not the same gift as teaching from the Scriptures, even though teaching may take on a prophetic tone from time to time. The main and obvious difference between tongues and prophecy, is that a prophetic word or message will be issued in a common language for all present in the assembly to understand. Fee rightly asserts how “[Paul] insists that in the gathered community only what is intelligible is permissible—because what is intelligible, especially prophecy, both edifies God’s people and leads to the conversion of others.”²⁴

²² Bruce, 133.

²³ Witherington, 280.

²⁴ Fee, 687.